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THE NESTOR OF AMERICAN SCHOOLMASTERS

CHEESMAN A. HERRICK

To have rounded out eighty and two years in perfect health and with well-preserved faculties; to have completed sixty-three years in the arduous calling of a teacher, the last twenty-eight of which have been without a day's absence because of illness; to have taught high ideals and shown a worthy example to above twenty thousand young men, and sent them forth to the usefulness and honor in public and private life; to have been schoolmaster to the United States senators, governors, and judges; to see his children and grandchildren pass through his own school, and in the heyday of youth to welcome his great-grandchildren as associates in the pursuit of knowledge; to stand as a stalwart oak while friends, colleagues, and family pass to the beyond; to keep amid all perplexities and vicissitudes a simple trust and an unswerving devotion to duty—this is but the life-history of Professor Zephaniah Hopper, of the Philadelphia Central High School. Today no citizen of Philadelphia is more respected than is this unpretentious teacher of young men, who seems to have found in disinterested service the secret of perpetual youth.

Zephaniah Hopper is of Quaker stock. His father was a carpenter with limited means, and, as young Zephaniah was the oldest of seven children, he was kept at school with difficulty, and kept there at all only because certain of his teachers urged that the lad's earnestness be rewarded with an opportunity to continue his studies. Of his school days Professor Hopper says he is sure that any good showing he may have made was more the result of diligent application than of superior talent, as he has always acquired knowledge with difficulty.

In 1838 the Central High School was established, and a year later young Hopper entered as a member of its second class. Marked ability on his part gained for him promotion to the first

class, and he was graduated in 1842. At the Central High School he came under the presidency of Alexander Dallas Bache, a great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin, who had already made for himself an honored name by his report on *Education in Europe*. The Central High School in which Zephaniah Hopper was educated was the embodiment of the educational ideal of one of the most advanced thinkers of his time, and the Central High School still bears the mark of Bache's influence.

Professor Hopper's life as student and teacher covers the period of free schools in Pennsylvania. While he was still at a private school in 1834, Thaddeus Stevens made his impassioned defense of the free school bill and secured state-supported schools. The Central High School was an early result of free education in Pennsylvania; it is also one of the oldest public high schools of the country. Few schools have done more for their communities than has the Central High School for Philadelphia; in manufactures and commerce, in the professions and public service, its graduates have had honored places, and throughout they have stood for what is best in the life of the city. Of this great school Zephaniah Hopper was first the product, and in it he has later been a most positive and beneficent influence.

In the autumn of 1842 Professor Hopper began his career as a teacher, at the salary of \$200 a year. At this time he walked a distance of seven miles to school in the morning and back again at night. Five years later the young schoolmaster became principal of the Jefferson Grammar School in Philadelphia, and here he soon made a reputation by his character and earnestness. These were the days of learning by effort, and Professor Hopper tells how he came to realize that in accurate work and strict drill there is a moral quality as well as a mental discipline. Few men are more famed than he as drillmaster and disciplinarian. Corporal punishment was common—"birching" the subject of our sketch calls it; and he is still remembered by Jefferson School boys as possessor of a vigorous arm who used to knock the dust out of the jackets of offenders; but the reminiscences of those days never fail to mention what are likely the most striking

characteristics of this man—his sense of justice and his fine discrimination in dealing with boys. The craft of the schoolmaster has changed much since the forties, but this great teacher has kept pace with the changes, and he is firm in the opinion that the days that are now are better than were those of old time.

The Jefferson Grammar School developed such an *esprit de corps* that its students of an earlier generation still point with pride to their connection with the school. The record of those from this school in passing for admission into the Central High School, and the character of their work after being admitted, reflected such credit on their principal that in 1854 he was asked to become a teacher in the school that had educated him. From the date of his appointment his service has been continuous; and the wonder is, as was remarked by the late United States commissioner of education, that human strength could have endured for so many years.

Professor Hopper began as a teacher of English, but his success as a private tutor in mathematics led to his transfer to that department. In 1869 he became a teacher in the Artisans' Night School in the Central High School building and later he was for twenty years principal of this school. Twice, for a space aggregating above two years, Professor Hopper was acting-president of the Central High School; but he refused to accept the presidency permanently, merely discharging the duties of the office until a suitable person could be found to relieve him, when he returned to the more intimate association he would have with pupils in the classroom. These decisions now appear as an evidence of the man's inspired common-sense, for they have contributed to length of life and increased usefulness.

In 1892 Professor Hopper lost his life's companion, to whom he had been married in 1845. His married life had been almost ideal, and, as he is a man of deep feeling and close home ties, the loss of his wife proved almost more than he could bear. He found comfort in his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and through them he has kept up the home interest; but he has also found consolation in communion with nature, and he has become in the past fourteen years an ardent and

skilled botanist. No youth ever pursued knowledge with keener zest than is shown by this young octogenarian. His regret is that he did not start in this field of science earlier in life, for he fears that he will not be able to compass the field to his satisfaction.

With the new interest the schoolmaster connected himself with the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences and joined its botanical expeditions. Not content with these, he organizes parties of his own, or goes alone; and in this way he has explored the country for many miles discovering rare specimens of flowers. Each season brings its delights; in the winter he studies trees and works in the extensive herbarium of the academy; summer and autumn flowers are eagerly sought, the dates of their appearance noted, and these compared with the times of their former appearance. This interest is kept up at Atlantic City, where Professor Hopper spends his vacations. In the early mornings and forenoons of the summer he takes long walks and gathers the flowers, to which he devotes the afternoons. He takes much pride in mounting his specimens and has prepared a private herbarium. As duplicate specimens are secured, they are prepared, and either the originals or the duplicates are presented to his friends.

Those who know this schoolmaster's interest often send him rare specimens of flowers from a distance, and he is always ready to exchange for these the flowers of his own locality. His diary contains repeated mention of some rare walk, some new flower, or the special beauty of an old friend. The activity of the man in this field of his endeavor is striking. His diary records that in 1903 he made eighty-eight botanical journeys, secured and mounted over four hundred specimens, gave away nearly four hundred specimens, and had twenty correspondents on botanical subjects. And all this time our botanist has been a teacher of mathematics. But he has found in botany an opportunity for out-of-door life, a means of health, and a diversion from his regular duties. In short, Professor Hopper attributes his present preserved health to his interest in botany, and he recommends the rule: "Ride a hobby and keep young."

But what of the teaching of Zephaniah Hopper all these years? Long ago he took as his ideal: "Never be old," and, "Be a friend of the boys." Those who know the man can testify how well he has realized his ideal. He walks with a sprightly, strong step; his carriage is erect, and his attention alert. With a show of pride he says: "I walk from my house to the school [a distance of sixteen city squares, or nearly two miles] in exactly twenty-seven minutes;" adding, with a twinkle of the eye: "which I think is as well as I could have done sixty years ago." In considering Professor Hopper, one is reminded at many points of Dr. Thomas Arnold; he has Arnold's pride of physical strength, and the feeling that any show of weakness would lower him in the estimation of his pupils. Recently the writer took a visitor to his classroom. He was standing in the center of the room; there were a dozen boys at the board; everything was at attention, and the work was going on admirably. One feels that this quiet, positive man may be sixty, but one's own senses belie the statement that he is eighty-two.

The secret of Professor Hopper's success in teaching is preparedness and the faithful devotion to details. Regularly he arrives at school at five minutes before eight; he goes to his room, lays out his working materials, and prepares for every detail of the day's work. No general ever planned a campaign with greater minuteness than that with which this teacher plans the work of each day. As a result he is never caught off his guard; he has prepared for every emergency. A president of the Philadelphia Board of Education, who was in Professor Hopper's classes in 1854, says of him that he commanded the respect of every boy that came to his room; that his very presence preserved order; etc. If this great teacher could give to the teachers of America the practical lesson of the worth of preparedness, he would render a greater service than would be done by the writing of innumerable books on the theory of education.

It is as a friend of the boys that Professor Hopper is most attractive. Fairness, friendliness, and cheerfulness have been his watchwords. But his friendship is no weak sentimentalism that coddles boys and condones their shortcomings; there are in

his character a ruggedness and stern justice, which are shown in dealing with dereliction; and yet no boy ever passed from his influence without feeling that he had come under the shadow of one who hated meanness and loved nobility. A man could not well have lived for sixty-three years in intimate association with young lives and not love those for whom he has worked. Professor Hopper's colleagues know that his justice is always enforced with a thought of the good of the boys, and, if in aught he errs, it is in tempering justice with too great mercy. He has been respected to a remarkable degree by the boys of the Central High School, and he is one of the few whom the successive generations of students have not dubbed with a nickname. True, his length of service has been the occasion of some pleasant rail-lery, but always attended with respect, and this pleasantry has been enjoyed by no one more than by Professor Hopper himself. A song has been composed, going to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," and containing such lines as:

When Zephaniah was quite small,
He played with Billy Penn, sir;

and

Zephaniah is our joy,
Our "Grand Old Man,"
Our youngest boy.

A sight never to be forgotten is the greeting to their old teacher by the Central High School alumni at their annual reunions. He is always called on for a speech, and he always gets the same generous, hearty welcome. His face beams with pride as he speaks to the large body of men whom he has helped to train; many of these men have come to high honors, and not a few of them seem Professor Hopper's seniors. As one contemplates this scene, he cannot avoid the conclusion: To be such a man, and sit thus enthroned in the heart's affection, is better than to wear a crown of empire.

In passing to his broader life, we find Professor Hopper a useful citizen, a Christian gentleman of temperate habits and refined tastes. He is probably without an enemy in the world. Of him in truth we could say: "He knows not how to speak a

word of harshness or how to make a foe." In these last days there come from every side tributes to his life and work. His name has become a household word in Philadelphia. John Wanamaker writes his congratulations, and adds: "I remember your name almost back to my first days in Philadelphia." In these hurrying times men have come and gone and are forgotten; but here in the serenity of youthful age is one who has gone on and on, and whose influence will go on forever. Not only is Professor Hopper a great teacher, but he is a remarkable example of the blessings of a life lived without worldly ambition or ostentation; he has the rewards of a man who seeks in a quiet way to do day by day the tasks which the successive days bring. When asked to express a sentiment with regard to his past life, he said, in words choked with emotion: "When I reflect that I have had continuous employment as a teacher since 1842, that I have had good health, and felt in love with my work, I cannot find words to express my gratitude."

Zephaniah Hopper is a refutation of the theory that a man should be superannuated at forty, at sixty, or at any other age.